

The Power of Light
Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 24:36-44
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1st Sunday in Advent
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Isaiah looked around at his world and saw mostly bad news. Cities burned with fire (1:7). Land devoured by other nations (1:7). A nation on the verge of destruction like Sodom and Gomorrah (1:9). Most of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah tell some version of that story – verse after verse of doom and gloom. Judah has failed to seek justice, failed to rescue the oppressed, failing to defend the orphan, failing to plead for the widow. (1:17). So now it's judgment time in Judah.

And then there's this little text of hope. Isaiah has to zoom way out from the present in order to see it. Somewhere off in the future, Jerusalem will be the world's hope instead of its victim. Somewhere off in the future, the nations will come not to destroy but to learn instructions directly from God. Somewhere off in the future, the nations won't need weapons or war – they will have learned how to mediate their differences.

There's hope, but you won't find it in present circumstances, Isaiah says, you'll find it sometime to come. Maybe not next week, maybe not next year or several to come. But you can count on it.

Matthew is kind of the reverse of Isaiah. Are you happy with present circumstances? Don't get too comfortable because difficult days of persecution are coming. Don't get lured into thinking that hope can be found in the present because earthquakes and wars and false Messiahs are coming. Your faith will be tested. Many will be lead astray. Many who remain faithful will be persecuted. Prepare for those days because in the midst of them, the Son of Man will return. And those who have endured, those whose love has not grown cold (24:12), they will be saved.

In the midst of calamity, Isaiah promises hope *somewhere in the future*. In the midst of the status quo, Matthew promises judgment *somewhere in the future*. But neither text will disclose any details on timing – when judgment or good news will happen. We're not told how long we have to endure suffering while we're in the thick of it. We're not told how soon we'll have to face temptation or persecution before it comes. The text won't disclose details on the timing. And I think that's one of the hardest parts of faithful living.

It's easier to endure suffering when you know how long it's going to last. There's less anxiety about negative events when you know when they are going to happen. But the Bible doesn't disclose that information. And maybe that's why we should trust it even more.

Because life doesn't give you that information. When you or your loved one gets the cancer diagnosis uncertainty is the world that you enter. When a marriage falls apart or a parent's decline requires your attention, timing and duration are the very details that you lose. When a friend or family member enters rehab, there's no countdown timer to let you know when it's over.

Isaiah and Matthew both know this. So does the church. I think that's why the church practices it every year – to condition us for the waiting. To prepare us to endure those parched times of faithful living when God's grace seems missing in action. To condition us to know what faithful waiting feelings like – waiting that anticipates good news but is prepared to wait for as long as it takes.

Advent means coming, but the flip side of knowing that God's peace or God's justice is coming, is admitting that neither peace nor justice is fully here. We have to learn how to live without it. So that when suffering comes to us, or injustice comes to us, or we experience oppression or temptation, we know how to endure, we know how to resist for as long as it takes.

Isaiah is a bit of an unlikely messenger of good news, not so much because of who he is, but because so much of his prophecy predicts bad news, not hope. So negative is the first 39 chapters, that I've often thought that cherry picking this one little section for Advent was a distortion of Isaiah's larger message. It represented the worst of the church's tendency to try to take the grace of faith without the cost of justice attached to it, to try to look on the bright side while the world is burning.

But this year I'm seeing how much more trustworthy a word of hope is from someone well acquainted with despair. Hope that ignores pain or suffering or injustice isn't worth much. But hope that is articulated in the middle of it – that kind of hope creates followers. It's why we lean in a little closer when a loved one on her death bed has hope to share, or a child in the worst of poverty evidences joy that seems to escape us. It's why the songs about promised lands are most credible penned by the hands of slaves.

Janelle learned that kind of hope last week. An African-American comic who travels across the US doing stand-up, she was completely distressed by the election results.¹ She called her mom expecting to find someone as stressed as her. Janelle expected to find her mom freaking out, since that's the way she was feeling. Instead she got a chipper, "Good morning!" "She was so chill that it was surprising," Janelle said. "I called her, and I was like, can you believe this? And she was like, you know where we live." She wasn't stressed because she had learned how to endure. She seemed to have learned where hope is rooted. Where it comes from and where to find it. And she was giving her daughter the same gift.

Isaiah *saw* the word. He didn't hear it. He *saw* it. Jerusalem lifted up above all others. Nations streaming to Jerusalem for nonviolent instruction to mediate their disputes – the end of war. Peace at last between people near and far. He was able to see a dream when it was still just that.

That may be one of the roles of any unlikely messenger – seeing the word before it's enacted. Maybe that's part of the role of the church – *seeing* the word lived out.

What's surprising about Isaiah's vision is that the word goes way beyond just reversing the present situation. Isaiah's vision isn't just that Israel returns home and lives safe and secure by itself. It's not just that the exile ends. It's world peace,

¹ *This American Life*, "The Sun Comes Up," Episode 602, November 11, 2016. "Janelle" interviewed by Neil Drumming, <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/radio-archives/episode/602/transcript>

global understanding. God at the center of all lives. It's a vision that goes way beyond addressing the immediate pain of Israel. It addresses what's wrong with the whole world with Israel playing a starring role.

Which might just be a warning or maybe a promise to those of us whose Advent plans have been reduced to getting some shopping done and preparing for the to receive or to be guests. It's precisely when the light of the world seems to dim, that God seems to start imagining big dreams for us. It's a hope that disrupts not just the world's status quo, but also our dimmed expectations for what's possible.

Perhaps that's why the church chooses to start off Advent with Apocalyptic texts that grate against the shopping mall culture that wants us to sing nothing more than "let it snow."

God wants us to imagine dreams much larger than the timid ones we accept for ourselves. God wants us to prepare for them, pray for them, dream them into existence. Maybe that's what the church is supposed to do especially when the rest of the world is giving up. To be like Isaiah, delivering an unlikely message – to a people in exile, God is going to do more than just homecoming. God is going to heal the whole world.

There is a strain of thought that believes that language like this makes Christians lazy. God is going to heal the whole world so we don't have to lift a finger to do anything about it. Christians look to the hope when the judgment of failing to protect the most vulnerable, of participating in injustice, or ignoring God's requirements – that judgment is all around. Christians ignore the 39 chapters of judgment in a vain attempt to cling to this little piece of hope. I understand the fear. It's real for some.

But in our church, this year, I worry more about us giving up on our deepest dreams when we realize they are not achievable as far as we can see. To lose ourselves in 39 chapters of analysis over what went wrong written in Isaiah, announced by NPR, printed by the Sun, the Post, and the Times. To obsess over the darkness that we forget the power of the light.

To people like us, Isaiah says, *see the word* – watch it unfurl. Prepare for it to come, disrupt, agitate, comfort, heal, and change the world. You might have to zoom way out from the present in order to see it. It might not be next week, or next year or even several more to come. But you can count on it.